

Seven Classes of Phrases

1. Absolute Phrase

An absolute phrase is a modifying parenthetical or subordinate phrase of a root sentence that includes a subject but does not have an acting verb so cannot stand on its own as sentence: “Their effort to regain the lead successful, the team continued to score until they pulled ahead by a wide margin.”

2. Appositive Phrase

An appositive phrase is one that restates a preceding term, or expands or explains it, in a parenthetical statement. There are three variations of appositive phrases: “Her dog, a bull mastiff, looks ridiculous with a pink bow stuck to her head” features a noun phrase. “His favorite hobby, knitting, is rather unusual for a man” includes a gerund phrase. “The Tahitian’s ambition, to become an ice skater, is unexpected” has an infinitive phrase.

Note that these three types of phrases are explained below; the distinction in the phrase types as applied above, as opposed to the types described below, is that each type serves as the basis for an appositive phrase; on their own, they need not be appositive, or set off.

3. Gerund Phrase

A gerund phrase includes a verbal, a hybrid that functions as a noun (or adjective). There are three distinct functions: “Juggling knives is not recommended as a relaxation technique” includes a gerund phrase as the subject of the sentence. “I’m going for a long walk off a short pier” features a gerund phrase as the sentence’s object. “She’s saving up for a vacation in Antarctica” has a gerund phrase as the object of a preposition.

4. Infinitive Phrase

An infinitive phrase includes the word to and a verb as the basis of a modification of a root sentence: “His effort to pass the bill doomed his political ambitions” includes an infinitive phrase that functions as an adjective modifying the previous noun. “He plans to see the movie” features an infinitive phrase that functions as the sentence’s object. “To write of the experience is to dredge up unpleasant memories” has an infinitive phrase that functions as the sentence’s subject. “To say as much is to admit guilt” includes an infinitive phrase that serves as predicate nominative, or a substitute subject. “I went to the store to buy some ice cream” features an infinitive phrase that stands as an adverb (modifying the verb went).

5. Noun Phrase

A noun phrase consists of a person, place, or thing and any modifiers: “This is a grammar lesson.” It may include one or more adjectives (as grammar modifies lesson here). It might include a noun and a modifying clause: “This is a lesson that explains the various types of phrases.” It might take the form of one of three other types of phrase: infinitive, participial, and prepositional. (The infinitive phrase is discussed above, and the latter two types are described below.) Many noun phrases are continuous; they consist of words in sequence. However, a noun phrase may be discontinuous, meaning that it is broken up into more than one element: “This lesson is one that explains the various types of phrases.”

6. Participial Phrase

A participial phrase consists of verbals ending in -ing or -ed, or another irregular form of a verb, and serves as an adjective: The participial phrase in “Having been lied to before, I was wary” modifies the word I. The phrase may be parenthetical within a sentence, too: In “You, knowing what you now know, are in a better position to judge,” the participial phrase modifies the word you.

7. Prepositional Phrase

A prepositional phrase consists of a preposition and a noun or pronoun that serves as the preposition’s object, and often one or more adjectives: “I went for a walk in the dark woods.” Prepositional phrases are often located at the head of a sentence. “When the sun went down, I hurried back.”